

Message Text

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ACTION OPIC-06

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8626

INFO AMCONSUL CASABLANCA

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY RABAT

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CASABLANCA FOR RFA

DEPT PASS OPIC AND COMMERCE

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAGR, EINV, BEXP, TS

SUBJ: VISIT OF AGRIBUSINESS COUNCIL: TRIP REPORT

REF: STATE 219539

1. (BEGIN SUMMARY) AGRIBUSINESS COUNCIL (ABC) MEMBERS KENNETH MUELLER, PRESIDENT, EUGENE GRASBERG AND EZRA MERRILL VISITED TUNISIA OCTOBER 2 THRU 8, TIMED TO CORRESPOND ALSO WITH VISIT OF REGIONAL FISHERIES ATTACHE, WILLIAM FOLSOM. THEY MET WITH EZZEDDINE CHELBI, CHEF DE CABINET, MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, AS WELL AS OTHER AGRICULTURAL OFFICIALS OF GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE INDUSTRY. PURPOSE OF VISIT WAS FURTHER TO DEFINE POTENTIAL US AGRIBUSINESS INVESTMENTS, TO PRESENT A TENTATIVE SCHEDULE AND DISCUSS THE MECHANICS OF AN AGRIBUSINESS INVESTMENT FORUM TO BE HELD IN NEW YORK--NOW PROPOSED FOR FEBRUARY--AND TO SOLICIT GOT VIEWS ON PARTICULAR PROJECT PROPOSALS. EMBASSY SHARES VIEW OF ABC THAT VISIT WAS MORE PRODUCTIVE THAN PREVIOUS AND CHANCES LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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REASONABLY GOOD THAT VIABLE PROJECTS/INVESTMENTS WILL EVENTUATE.
(END SUMMARY)

2. PROJECTS THAT SEEM TO BE FARTHEST ALONG (AND HAVE BEST CHANCE OF SUCCESS) ARE DAIRY, EARLY FRUITS AND VEGETABLES (FOR EXPORT) AND CANNING OF VEGETABLES (FOR EXPORT). (DAIRY PROJECT WOULD BE ORIENTED TOWARD TWO INTERESTS. MAIN INTEREST FOR GOT

WOULD BE IN OUTREACH TO IMPROVE AND INCREASE REGIONAL PRODUCTION. FOR US INVESTOR APPEAL WOULD BE IN OPPORTUNITY TO MANUFACTURE AND MARKET HIGHER VALUE PRODUCTS.) CHELBI REQUESTED THAT ABC HOLD ANY PROPOSALS FOR POULTRY AND EGG PRODUCTION IN ABEYANCE FOR TIME BEING. LIVESTOCK AND FISHERY PROJECTS ARE STILL IN THE EARLY INFORMATION GATHERING AND VERIFICATION STAGE.

3. ABC TEAM WAS PLEASED TO DISCOVER THAT CHELBI AND HIS ASSOCIATES WERE COOPERATIVE AND WILLING TO DISCUSS FRANKLY ISSUES AT HAND. CHELBI WANTED TO DEFINE PHILOSOPHICAL AND PROCEDURAL FRAMEWORK IN WHICH BASIC ELEMENTS OF PROJECTS WOULD BE DEFINED. ABC IN TURN WANTED TO DISCUSS DETAILS OF PARTICULAR PROJECTS. DISCUSSIONS WITH CHELBI (THERE WERE THREE) WERE THEREFORE ONES IN WHICH NEITHER PARTY WON OVER THE OTHER TO HIS POSITION, BUT SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS WAS MADE IN UNDERSTANDING WHAT EACH SIDE HAS COME TO EXPECT OF THE OTHER. CONSENSUS NOW IS THAT PROJECT PROFILES ARE TO BE FORWARDED TO CHELBI FOR REVIEW AS DRAFTS ARE COMPLETED (WITH COPIES TO EMBASSY), AND ARE TO CONTAIN BOTH SCHEMATIC AND SPECIFIC SECTIONS. LATTER ARE TO BE CONSIDERED ILLUSTRATIVE ONLY, WITH GOT BEING PREPARED AT NEW YORK FORUM AND IN FOLLOWING NEGOTIATIONS TO DISCUSS SPECIFIC ALTERNATIVES ON LOCATION, ETC.

4. AS IT NOW STANDS, AT LEAST GRASBERG WILL RETURN IN JANUARY TO TIE UP A NUMBER OF LOOSE ENDS INCLUDING PROGRAM AND PARTICIPANTS FOR PROPOSED FEBRUARY NEW YORK INVESTMENT FORUM. BASIC LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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QUESTIONS SUCH AS CONTRACTUAL ARRANGEMENTS WITH GOT AND PRIVATE ENTITIES, PRICING AND FINANCING NEED TO BE WORKED OUT, BUT SOLUTIONS APPEAR TO BE ATTAINABLE.

5. COMMENT. MUELLER DISCUSSED WITH EMBASSY TIMING OF NEW YORK FORUM--AND ACTIVITIES IN EGYPT WHICH COMPETE FOR TIME OF ABC STAFF. WE AGREED TO MUELLER'S SUGGESTION THAT TUNISIAN FORUM BE DELAYED TO EARLY NEXT YEAR TO ALLOW AMPLE TIME FOR WELL PREPARED PROJECTS AND PROGRAM. AFTER TWO YEARS OF DISCUSSION AND STUDY, IT APPEARS THAT ABC MAY NOW BE ABLE TO GENERATE SOME US AGRIBUSINESS INVESTMENT IN TUNISIA. PROJECTS AT FIRST WILL BE ON MODEST LEVEL AND, GIVEN THE TUNISIAN UNWILLINGNESS TO ALLOW PRIME AGRICULTURAL LAND TO BE MANAGED BY NON-TUNISIANS, ARE QUITE LIKELY TO REMAIN EITHER ON A SMALL SCALE OR IN NON-LAND EXTENSIVE SECTORS.
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